

A History of Indian Buddhism: From Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana.

By Hirakawa Akira, Translated by Paul Groner

Publisher: University of Hawaii Press.

Place of Publication: Honolulu.

Publication Year: 1990.

Introduction

The Special Characteristics of Indian Buddhism

BECAUSE BUDDHISM originated and developed in India, using the adjective “Indian” to describe it may seem unnecessary. When Buddhism spread beyond India to Southeast Asia, Tibet, China, Japan, and other lands, certain aspects of Buddhism were emphasized in each locale, generating a wide variety of interpretations and practices. Buddhism was adapted to meet the requirements of the people of each area, resulting in a wide variation of interpretations. Indian Buddhism, too, had unique characteristics not emphasized in other regions. Thus, the term “Indian Buddhism” is often used today to distinguish it from the Buddhism of other countries.

When Indian Buddhism is compared to Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, differences in climate and geography are seen to affect religious practice; those adaptations in practice brought about changes in doctrine. In contrast, the countries where Theravāda Buddhism is practiced—such as Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand—have climates and geographies resembling those of India more than those of China and Japan. As a result, Theravāda religious practice is much closer to Indian Buddhism than to East Asian Buddhism.

A brief survey of the development and geographical spread of Indian Buddhism reveals much about the universal qualities and the distinctive characteristics of Indian Buddhism, as well as providing an overview of its development. Buddhism was founded in the fifth century B.C.E. by

Śākyamuni, who was born in a region of northern India and Nepal controlled by the Śākya tribe. After he decided to become a religious mendicant, he traveled to the country of Magadha in central India, south of the Ganges River, where he performed religious austerities. When he was approximately thirty-five years old, Śākyamuni realized enlightenment. This experience, central to Buddhism, was described as "being enlightened to the undying" and "discovering the path to freedom from suffering." Although humankind is afflicted by various types of suffering, the fear of death is the most basic, leading Śākyamuni to describe his experience in terms of the "undying." Although Śākyamuni ceased to exist physically when he was eighty years old, his declaration of enlightenment expressed his confidence that his mind had realized eternal truths. The suffering present in all human existence has been a constant concern of mankind. Śākyamuni's discovery of an answer to this problem, a path of liberation from suffering, has been the most universally appealing characteristic of Buddhism. More than any other feature, it has enabled Buddhism to survive until the present.

In India, however, Buddhism disappeared. By briefly surveying the history of Indian Buddhism, some of its special characteristics as well as several reasons for its disappearance can be ascertained. At the time of Śākyamuni Buddha's death in the fifth century B.C.E., the Buddhist order consisted of small groups of mendicants in central India. Through the efforts of Śākyamuni's disciples, Buddhism spread to the south and west. In the third century B.C.E., after the conversion of King Aśoka, Buddhism was soon promulgated throughout India. With the growth of the order and increases in the numbers of monks, disputes arose over the observance of monastic discipline and the interpretation of doctrine. The early order eventually divided into two schools: the progressive Mahāsaṅghika and the conservative Sthaviravāda (P. Theravāda). Additional schisms occurred until many schools existed and Buddhism entered its sectarian (Nikāya or Hīnayāna) period.

The terms "eighteen schools" or "twenty schools" are found in many traditional sources that refer to Sectarian Buddhism, but the names of many more than twenty schools are known from inscriptions. Of these schools, the Theravāda, Sarvāstivāda, Sautrāntika, Sammatīya (all of Sthaviravāda lineage), and the Mahāsaṅghika schools were the most important. By the beginning of the common era, Mahāyāna Buddhism had also begun to develop. Mahāyāna (great vehicle) Buddhists criticized the adherents of Nikāya Buddhism by calling them "Hīnayāna" (inferior vehicle) Buddhists, a deprecatory term applied especially to Sarvāstivādins.

Although a number of schools had arisen and had criticized each

other, all of them were recognized as Buddhist. This toleration for a wide variety of interpretations was based on the Buddhist emphasis on the importance of the individual's enlightenment and his freedom to contemplate and interpret doctrine. According to the *Wen-shu-shih-li wen ching* (T 14:501a-b, *Mañjuśrīpariṣcchā?*), the schisms within Buddhism resulted from the differing explanations of Śākyamuni's teaching by twenty of his followers. Each adherent, however, was said to have received and transmitted the Buddha's true teaching. In the travel diary of I-ching (635-713), a Chinese monk who journeyed through India and Southeast Asia, the Buddha's teaching was said to be like a golden cane that had been broken into eighteen pieces. Just as each piece of the cane was part of the original staff, so did the essence of the Buddha's teachings remain unchanged even though the early order had been fragmented into eighteen schools (*Nan-hai chi-kuei nei-fa chuan*, T 54:205c). Similar discussions are found in Buddhist scriptures. Buddhist schools could recognize each other as Buddhist because their teachings were not established on blind faith. Although this tolerance for doctrinal differences is one of Buddhism's finest features, it permitted the appearance of such a variety of differing opinions in the order that it led to a weakening of the doctrinal stances that differentiated Buddhism from the other Indian religions of that time.

The rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism approximately five hundred years after the Buddha's death is an example of how Buddhism responded to the demands of a new time. Mahāyāna Buddhism included many elements not found in early Buddhism. Despite these innovations, the original spirit of the Buddha's teaching was not lost in early Mahāyāna. In fact, early Mahāyānists revived the spirit of the Buddha's teaching by adapting it for a new age. However, these innovative elements brought hidden dangers with them. As time passed, many Buddhists became more interested in the new additions than in the original message of the Buddha.

Magical elements played an important role in Mahāyāna Buddhism from the beginning, probably because they were a response to the religious needs of the common people. Perfection of wisdom *sūtras* contained claims that the text could protect those who followed it. In addition, perfection of wisdom *sūtras* were sometimes called "great wisdom *mantras*" (*mahā-vidyā-mantra*) or "great mantras" (*mahā-mantra*). According to the *Fa-hua ching* (T 9:56c-58b, *Saddharmapuṇḍarikasūtra*), faith in the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara would protect a person from all disasters. Advocacy of the efficacy of *dhāraṇī* (magical incantations) was found in many Mahāyāna scriptures. Over the centuries, these magical formulas came to play an increasingly important role in Mahāyāna

Buddhism until, by the sixth century, Esoteric Buddhism had emerged as a distinct movement and begun to develop in India.

Although Esoteric Buddhism clearly belongs within the Buddhist fold, its rituals are virtually indistinguishable from those of Hinduism. Eventually much of the doctrinal basis for Esoteric Buddhism was ignored and only its ritual emphasized, contributing to the eventual absorption of Esoteric Buddhism by Hinduism. In contrast, Chinese, Japanese, and Southeast Asian Buddhism developed in areas and cultures that differed from India. As a result, many elements of Indian Buddhism were not easily assimilated by the indigenous cultures. In fact, many of the distinguishing characteristics of Indian Buddhism were preserved because they were so conspicuous in other countries. For example, because Buddhist teachings of nonsubstantiality provided the doctrinal basis for the "Hindu" ceremonies in the Chinese and Japanese Esoteric Buddhist traditions, these traditions never lost their Buddhist character. In India, however, as Buddhism became more Esoteric, it was increasingly assimilated into Hinduism, until it finally lost its Buddhist character.

Early Mahāyāna Buddhism was a religion of many facets; it included Amitābha worship, as well as such scriptures as the *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Lotus (Saddharmapundarika)*, and *Avataṃsaka sūtras*. From the second century of the common era onward, theoretical works based on these scriptures were composed. The Mādhyamika School was based on teachings concerning nonsubstantiality. At first, the appellation "Mādhyamika" was not used to designate the school because an opposing Mahāyāna tradition was not present. Only after the Yogācāra tradition arose about one century after Mādhyamika did the term "Mādhyamika" come to be used. Yogācāra was based on the systematic investigation of ideation-only doctrines. For the next several centuries the two traditions coexisted.

Even before Yogācāra emerged as a distinct tradition, early Mahāyāna texts had been compiled concerning ideation-only (*vijñaptimātratā*) and Buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*, the potential to realize Buddhahood). Among them were the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* (T 666-667), *Śrīmālādevīśiṃhanādasūtra* (T 310.48, 353) and the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* (T 374-375). As time passed, the Mādhyamika and Yogācāra schools developed and influenced each other, as well as Esoteric Buddhism.

Even during the period when Mahāyāna Buddhism was most influential, Nikāya Buddhism was still flourishing. In fact, Nikāya Buddhism was always the stronger of the two movements, as is demonstrated in the travel diaries of such Chinese pilgrims to India as Fa-hsien (in India 399-414), Hsüan-tsang (602-664), and I-ching (635-713). By I-

ching's time, the differences between Nikāya and Mahāyāna Buddhism had become less pronounced and the two traditions had begun to blend together. Esoteric Buddhism subsequently became popular and powerful, influencing both the Nikāya and Mahāyāna traditions. Finally, as Hinduism became stronger and the Muslims invaded India, Buddhism lost much of its vigor. At the end of the twelfth century, the Vikramaśīla Monastery was burned by Muslim troops, an event that symbolized the disappearance of Buddhist institutions from most of India. Buddhism did survive, however, in eastern Bengal, where a small number of people have carried on the Buddhist tradition until the present.

Even after the Muslim invasions, Hinduism remained strong. Jainism also managed to survive although with only a small number of adherents; Buddhism, however, disappeared, even though it had once spread across and dominated India. A consideration of several of the reasons for the different destinies of the religions helps elucidate some of the characteristics of Indian Buddhism.

Indian Buddhism did not establish a fixed orthodox doctrinal position and then firmly reject any deviations from it as heterodoxy. Consequently, Buddhist doctrine gradually changed in a variety of ways. One reason for Buddhism's disappearance from India may lie in its liberal attitude toward different interpretations of doctrine. This argument does not imply that the Buddhist tolerance of doctrinal diversity was mistaken. Because people's abilities to understand Buddhism differed and historical circumstances changed, it was appropriate that Buddhist doctrine reflect the needs of its audience. However, if Buddhism could evolve freely, then the possibility that Buddhism could disappear also had to be considered. Theories concerning the decline or disappearance of "True" Buddhism circulated very early in Buddhist history. One of the most influential theories in East Asia divided Buddhist history into three periods: True Dharma, Counterfeit Dharma, and the End of the Dharma.

Buddhism is not the only religion that does not stress strict adherence to a certain set of doctrines. Hinduism also adopted this flexible attitude. For example, the *Bhagavad-gītā*, one of the best known Hindu scriptures, permits a variety of doctrinal positions. The demand for uncompromising fidelity to doctrine is rarely, if ever, found in Hinduism. Thus, a liberal attitude toward doctrine by itself cannot explain the disappearance of Buddhism from India.

Buddhism's rejection of an eternal and substantial Self (*ātman*), a position maintained since Early Buddhism, may have been an important factor. Buddhism competed with Hinduism, Jainism, and other religious traditions that all argued for the existence of a substantial Self.

In addition, theories advocating the existence of *ātman* were closely tied to teachings about rebirth. Because the belief in rebirth is one of the most important tenets of Indian religion, Buddhists also had to develop theories to explain it. However, rebirth is not a necessary tenet of Śākyamuni's teachings. Although he did not reject rebirth, Śākyamuni was primarily concerned with liberation from the suffering of existence. If existence consisted of cycles of birth and death, then deliverance from those cycles was his goal. Thus Early Buddhists did not need to dismiss rebirth. Instead, theories concerning rebirth were incorporated into Buddhism, and the ultimate goal of the Buddhist practitioner was interpreted as freedom from the cycles of birth and death.

If rebirth were accepted as a religious teaching, then something must account for continuity from existence to existence. Although Buddhists did not recognize the existence of *ātman*, they eventually had to recognize the existence of some entity or force that passed through the cycles of rebirths and performed at least some of the functions of an *ātman*. The Mahāyāna concepts of Buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*) and store-consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*) were similar in some of their functions to *ātman*. Within Nikāya Buddhism, the Sarvāstivāda School developed a systematic and mechanical explanation of human existence to demonstrate that no *ātman* existed. However, the Sarvāstivāda School lost much of its strength. In contrast, the Sāmatīya School gained strength in later times, in part because of the appealing quality of their argument that a lasting *puṅgalā* (Person) was present in each individual. The travel diaries of both Hsüan-tsang and I-ching reveal that by the seventh and eighth centuries the Sāmatīya School was more powerful than the Sarvāstivāda.

Buddhism arose at a time of much suffering. The teachings of non-substantiality and the nonexistence of a substantial Self were emphasized by the historical Buddha. As time passed, however, Buddhist teaching changed and doctrines developed that were similar to the views on *ātman* maintained by other Indian religions. Even as these teachings developed, Buddhism was already losing influence in India. Thus, Buddhism's original rejection of the *ātman* was probably one of several factors that led to its decline in India.

Teachings and theories about rebirth played a key role in the development of Indian Buddhist thought. In contrast, when Indian Buddhism was introduced to China and Japan, although rebirth was accepted as a part of Buddhism, it did not play a central role in the development of East Asian Buddhism. This difference arose because traditional Chinese and Japanese beliefs in spirits and souls were not based on rebirth. In conclusion, the following two points are two of the main themes that

can be traced through Indian Buddhism. First, Buddhism's fundamental aim, the deliverance of people from suffering, was one of its most attractive features. Second, the history of Indian Buddhism is inextricably concerned with the formulation of doctrines that explain the mechanisms of rebirth.

The Periods of Indian Buddhism

Indian Buddhism may be divided into the following five periods: (1) Early Buddhism, (2) Nikāya or Sectarian (often called Hīnayāna) Buddhism, (3) early Mahāyāna Buddhism, (4) later Mahāyāna Buddhism, and (5) Esoteric Buddhism. Although the five periods are arranged in the chronological order in which the traditions arose, they are also based on a categorization of types of Buddhism as much as historical criteria. This book covers the first three periods.

The discussion of the first period is focused around a clear description of the Buddha's teaching. The portrait of Early Buddhism is completed with a discussion of the Buddha's biography and an account of the establishment of the early Buddhist order. The order continued to develop after the Buddha's death. Although the historical sources for this period are meager, the history of the order through the time of King Aśoka is chronicled. Aśoka's view of Buddhism is included in this section because it was similar in many ways to Early Buddhism.

Approximately one century after the Buddha's death, the early order split into the Mahāsaṅghika and Sthaviravāda schools. Later, further schisms occurred, resulting in a number of additional schools. The second period of Buddhist history is concerned with the development of Sectarian (Nikāya) Buddhism. Buddhist doctrine at that time was typified by the development of scholastic *abhidharma* philosophy. Because the tradition differed from Early Buddhism in many ways, most scholars distinguish between Early and Sectarian Buddhism. Sectarian Buddhism was a major force in India for over one thousand years, but most of its important doctrinal development occurred during its first three centuries, between 150 B.C.E. and 150 C.E.

Of the more than twenty sects, the doctrines of only the Sarvāstivāda and Theravāda schools are understood in any detail today. Only a little is known about the doctrines of other schools because of the paucity of information concerning them. The Sautrāntika and Sammitīya schools flourished after the beginning of the common era. Although both probably had highly developed systems of doctrine, detailed information about them has not survived. When I-ching departed from Canton for

India in 671, the Theravāda, Sarvāstivāda, Sammatīya, and Mahāsaṅghika schools were still thriving. Later, they gradually blended with Mahāyāna Buddhism. In addition, both Sectarian and Mahāyāna Buddhism were influenced by Esoteric Buddhism. Unfortunately, little is known about the later phases of Sectarian Buddhism.

Mahāyāna scriptures were already in existence by the first century B.C.E., indicating that Mahāyāna Buddhism must have arisen around the beginning of the common era while Sectarian Buddhism was still developing. Early Mahāyāna practitioners were especially interested in teachings on nonsubstantiality or emptiness. Although mentions of nonsubstantiality can be found in Early Buddhist scriptures, Mahāyānists stressed and developed this theme far beyond anything found in either Early or Nikāya Buddhism.

Mahāyāna Buddhists strove to emulate the Buddha, following the same path and achieving the same status as he did by realizing Buddhahood and saving all sentient beings. Mahāyānists denigrated Sectarian Buddhists, claiming that Sectarian Buddhists were content to remain disciples of the Buddha instead of striving to equal his achievement. Mahāyāna Buddhists referred to Sectarian Buddhism as “*śrāvakayāna*” (vehicle for disciples or hearers), a term that implied that Sectarian Buddhists were more passive and had lower aspirations than Mahāyānists. Sectarian Buddhists were criticized as being content to study for their own benefit while Mahāyānists strove to teach others and bring them salvation. Mahāyāna Buddhists referred to themselves as “*bodhisattvas*” (beings who aspired to realize supreme enlightenment) and to their teachings as the “*bodhisattvayāna*” (vehicle for bodhisattvas). Although the term “*bodhisattva*” had been used earlier by Sectarian Buddhists to refer to the historical Buddha when he was still practicing to realize enlightenment, the Mahāyāna usage extended this appellation to many others. Later, the terms “*śrāvakayāna*” and “*bodhisattvayāna*” were often replaced by the terms “*Hīnayāna*” (small or inferior vehicle) and “*Mahāyāna*” (great vehicle). From approximately 100 B.C.E. to 100 C.E., large numbers of Mahāyāna scriptures were composed by nameless bodhisattvas.

In the third part of this study, early Mahāyāna Buddhism, the origins of Mahāyāna and the contents of early Mahāyāna scriptures are examined.

The last two periods of Indian Buddhism are not discussed in this volume, but a brief summary of later developments will help place the themes discussed above in perspective. During the fourth period, later Mahāyāna Buddhism, four major types of thought developed: (1) Mādhyamika, which arose after the second century C.E.; (2) Yogācāra

teachings of ideation-only, which appeared one century after Mādhyamika; (3) Tathāgatagarbha doctrines that developed in parallel with Yogācāra thought; and (4) Buddhist logic, which arose after the above three traditions. The Mādhyamika tradition eventually split into two schools of thought: the Svātantrika and the Prāsaṅgika. Later, some Mādhyamika and Yogācāra groups joined to produce a Yogācāra-Mādhyamika tradition. By the sixth and seventh centuries, Esoteric Buddhism had arisen and attracted the attention of some advocates of Mādhyamika and Yogācāra. However, many aspects of the relationship between Mahāyāna and Esoteric Buddhism remain unclear.

The fifth period of Indian Buddhism concerns Esoteric Buddhism. The serious academic study of this tradition is still in its early stages because of a number of problems that make research difficult. Although a large number of Esoteric Buddhist scriptures are extant, they have not been put into any kind of order. In addition, because Esoteric Buddhism was influenced by Hinduism, further research into Hinduism is necessary. Finally, ritual as well as doctrine must be examined if Esoteric Buddhism is to be fully understood. In Esoteric Buddhist texts, teachings are sometimes referred to as “Esoteric” and differentiated from “exoteric” Mahāyāna teachings, thereby indicating that the compilers of Esoteric works believed that it had features not found in the Mahāyāna tradition. Consequently, Esoteric Buddhism is assigned to a separate period of Indian Buddhism.

In this study, the categorization of periods has been based on the development of Indian Buddhism because its purpose is to describe the development of Indian Buddhist doctrine; but the study could also have focused on other models and have been arranged according to Indian dynastic history.

Although Buddhism was a major force in India from the fifth century B.C.E. until after the tenth century C.E., this period covers only about one-half of Indian history. Most Indian historians consider the invasion of India by Muslims of Turkish ancestry in the eleventh century to mark the division between ancient and medieval history. Modern Indian history begins in the eighteenth century with British control of India. Thus the story of “Buddhist India” belongs to ancient history. During that period, it was one of a number of Indian religions. Thus the reader must remember that this survey of Indian Buddhism covers only part of the history of Indian thought.

PART ONE

*EARLY
BUDDHISM*

CHAPTER 1

Indian Religion at the Time of the Buddha

India Before Buddhism

BUDDHISM WAS INFLUENCED by the social and religious environment in which it developed. In approximately 1500 B.C.E., the Aryans crossed the mountains of the Hindu Kush and invaded India. When they arrived, they found aboriginal peoples such as the Mundas and Dravidians. The Dravidians had a highly developed culture and constituted a large proportion of the population. Although they were subjugated by the Aryans and integrated into society as slave classes, the Dravidians influenced later Indian culture in many ways. Elements of their religion such as the worship of goddesses, snake gods, and tree spirits played a particularly important role in the Hinduism of later centuries.

Another people, too, lived in India before the arrival of the Aryans. They are the people who founded the Indus civilization, a highly developed culture that was situated on the Indus River and is thought to have flourished from approximately 2500 to 1500 B.C.E. Two of its cities, Harappā and Mohenjo-dāro, are particularly well known as archeological sites. Archeological investigations have revealed that this culture covered an extensive area, worked with bronze, and constructed well-organized cities. Many of the objects found suggest that Indus civilization substantially influenced Hinduism; but the sudden decline of the Indus civilization has left unanswered questions about how its people contributed to the development of later Indian civilization.

The Aryans entered India from the northwest; by 1200 B.C.E., they

had settled along the upper reaches of the Ganges River in the Punjab. Their religion, based on the *R̥g-veda*, was a form of polytheism in which forces of nature, such as the sky, rain, wind, and thunder, were deified. From 1000 B.C.E. on, they continued their advance eastward, gradually settling the fertile area between the Ganges and the Jumna rivers. Because the area was blessed with natural resources and free from external enemies, the Aryans developed a rich culture from 1000 to 500 B.C.E., and many of the developments that characterized later Indian civilization can be traced back to this period. By 1000 B.C.E., three texts that were successors to the *R̥g-veda*—the *Sāma-veda*, *Yajur-veda*, and *Atharva-veda*—had been compiled. The *Brāhmaṇas*, which explain the proper procedures for performing Vedic sacrifices, were composed around 800 B.C.E., and the philosophical texts of the early *Upaniṣads* were compiled around 500 B.C.E.

During this period, the Aryans were a tribal people primarily engaged in farming and herding. Merchant and artisan classes had begun to appear, although large cities had not yet developed. Labor was becoming more specialized. Society was divided into four classes, called *varṇa* (colors). At the top were two classes: the priestly class (*brāhmaṇa*), composed of those who sacrificed to the gods, and the ruling caste (*kṣatriya*), composed of rulers and warriors. Below them was the *vaiśya* class, composed of farmers, herders, merchants, and artisans. The duty of the slave class (*śūdra*) was to serve the other three classes. Eventually the system became more specialized and produced the many divisions that make up the caste system today. A member of one class was usually not allowed to marry or even eat with someone from another class.

Monarchies ruled by kings (*rājan*) with dictatorial powers arose, and alliances and rivalries developed. The Indian epic the *Mahābhārata* concerns the effects of a war between the tribes, that between the Bharatas and the Pūrus. Among the famous kings of this period was Janaka from Videha, a country to the east of the central lands (*madhyadeśa*) of Brahmanism, which were situated between the Ganges and Jumna rivers. In Videha, culture and thought revolved around powerful kings, while in the central lands, the priests were the center of society. As the Aryans advanced eastward and conquered the central areas drained by the Ganges, they expanded their territory and strengthened their kingdoms. Relations with the conquered population were closer than in the central lands because the culture and social system were not as influenced by Aryan culture. It was during this time of political and social change in areas similar to Videha that the founder of Buddhism was born.

Indian Religion at the Time of the Buddha

The Buddha was born during a period when important social and religious changes were occurring in central India. These changes later played a significant role in enabling Buddhism to spread throughout India. Although Vedic religion and its priestly class were influential and powerful in northern India, they had only begun to spread to the recently conquered lands of central India, which were dominated by the warrior classes.

As the Aryans gradually advanced from northern India down into central India, small tribes united to form monarchies. Sixteen countries existed in central India at the time of the Buddha, but the weaker ones were gradually being conquered by the more powerful monarchies. The most important of these large countries were Kauśāla, in the northwestern part of central India with its capital at Śrāvastī, and Magadha, south of the central part of the Ganges River with its capital at Rājagṛha. Magadha would eventually unify India, relying on its rich farm areas for its power. At the time of the Buddha, powerful kings were already beginning to emerge.

The Gangetic plain with its hot climate and plentiful rainfall is a rich farm area. At first, farmers and a landlord class dominated the area; but with the development of wealthy classes, merchants and craftsmen appeared on the Gangetic plain, and cities developed. The merchants and the craftsmen organized into guilds and trade organizations. Later, a class of very wealthy merchants (*śreṣṭhin*) developed. Thus at the time of the Buddha, major political and economic changes were occurring in central India, and the old system of social classes was disintegrating.

The Brahman priestly class had lost much of its prestige, suggesting that the religion of the *Vedas* with its worship of natural phenomena no longer had as much appeal as in earlier times. The intellectual classes of the period were interested in the Upanishadic philosophy, which identified *ātman* (individual soul) with *brahman* (cosmic principle). They could no longer be satisfied with seemingly primitive religious beliefs that deified natural phenomena. In addition, the Aryans had come into contact with Dravidian religion and had been influenced by it. All of these factors helped create an environment conducive to the development of new religious beliefs.

Central India at that time was an agriculturally rich area that produced abundant food and thus could support leisured classes as well as large numbers of monks. People with religious interests often left their homes and became wandering mendicants (*parivṛājaka*), living off alms

from householders while they immersed themselves into a search for truth. Although people could usually be confident of their livelihood during this time, it was also a period with few diversions or amusements. As a result, young people in particular seem to have been beset by anxieties and boredom and to have turned away from the everyday world to seek truth in religion. Many men and women of good families joined religious orders.

At the time of the Buddha, there were two primary classes of religious practitioners in India: the *brāhmaṇas* and the *śramaṇas*. The *brāhmaṇas*, representatives of the more traditional type of practitioner, were followers of Vedic religion who officiated at sacrifices. At the same time, they devoted themselves to seeking the Absolute through the study of a philosophy that identified *ātman* with *brahman*. A *brāhmaṇa*'s life ideally was divided into four stages. When young, he was accepted as a disciple by a teacher and devoted himself to the study of the *Vedas*. When his studies were completed, he returned home to marry and became a householder. When he grew old, he let his son take over the household and retired to the forest to live and perform religious practices. Finally, he abandoned even his abode in the forest to live a life of wandering and died while wandering.

The second type of religious practitioner, the *śramaṇa* or "person who strives," was a new type of figure not mentioned in the older *Upaniṣads*. He abandoned his home to lead a life of wandering and begging. Often he entered this way of life while young; there was no requirement that he pass through the other stages of life before becoming a *śramaṇa*. He devoted himself to controlling and limiting his desires, practicing yoga, and performing severe religious austerities in the forest to experience the Absolute or to escape death.

Six famous *śramaṇas* who lived around the time of the Buddha are mentioned in Buddhist scriptures. They are called the Six Heterodox Teachers. Each was the leader (*gaṇin*) of a group of disciples. The six are called Pūraṇa Kāśyapa, Maskarin Gośālīputra, Ajita Keśakambala, Kakuda Kātyāyana, Sañjayin Vairatīputra, and Nirgrantha Jñāti-putra.

One of the primary concerns of these *śramaṇas* was whether moral actions would have any effect on the person who performed them. The first heterodox teacher, Pūraṇa, argued that good and bad actions had no particular effect on the person who performed them. He denied morality, arguing that even if a person murdered and stole, his actions could not necessarily be considered bad since they resulted in no moral effects.

The second heterodox teacher, Maskarin Gośālīputra, denied causal-

ity. According to Gośālīputra, a person's rise or fall in the world was determined by fate, not by his actions. His followers were called the Ājīvakas (Ājivikas). The term "Ājīvika" is translated in Chinese Buddhist texts as "a heterodox religion (whose members lead) an evil life" (*hsieh-ming wai-tao*); however, the Indian term probably meant "those who follow a strict mode of life," referring to the severe austerities performed by the Ājīvika followers. The group is mentioned in the edicts of Aśoka and in the *Artha-śāstra*. Along with the Buddhists and Jainas, the Ājīvikas remained an important group in India during the following centuries. Gośālīputra is said to have practiced austerities with one of the founders of Jainism, Mahāvīra, and apparently believed that he could attain salvation through those austerities.

The third heterodox teacher, Ajita Keśakambala, took a materialist position and argued that everything was composed of only four elements: earth, water, fire, and wind. Consequently, moral acts were meaningless. The materialist position was later maintained by the Lokāyata or Cārvāka tradition.

The fourth heterodox teacher, Kakuda Kātyāyana, recognized seven elements: earth, water, fire, wind, pain, pleasure, and life. Because the seven elements were unchanging, Kakuda argued that when a man was killed with a knife, the knife only entered the spaces between the elements. Because the elements, the only real entities, were unharmed, the killing was of no consequence. Kakuda's theory of the elements was a forerunner of Vaiśeṣika theories.

The fifth heterodox teacher, Sañjayin Vairāṭṭīputra, was a skeptic. He refused to give definite answers to questions, relying instead on evasive statements. The skeptics' position was apparently based on serious doubts about the nature of knowledge and on their investigations of logic. Two of the Buddha's most important disciples, Śāriputra and Mahāmaudgalyāyana, came from this school.

The sixth heterodox teacher, Nirgrantha Jñātīputra, is also known as Mahāvīra, one of the founders of Jainism. The term "Nirgrantha" refers to being freed of fetters. Mahāvīra originally belonged to the Nirgrantha School, a group of ascetics who attempted to free themselves of physical and mental fetters through the practice of austerities. Through assiduous practice, Mahāvīra attained enlightenment and realized that he was a Jina (a victor or one who had conquered ignorance). After Mahāvīra's death, his school called itself the Jaina order. The Nirgrantha School claims to have had a long history before Mahāvīra's time. In fact Pārśva (or Pāsa), Mahāvīra's predecessor in the largely mythological lineage of the twenty-four founders of Jainism, was a historical figure.

Jainism and Buddhism were among the strongest of the non-Brahmanical religions, and they share many of the same doctrines and technical terms. The goal of the Jainas is to free the soul by overcoming the instincts and desires that arise from the physical body. The Jainas thus perform austerities to weaken the body's strength. The Jaina practitioner is also expected to make five great vows, which form the basis of his moral discipline. The prohibition against killing is particularly strict. The rule against possessions is carried to such an extreme by one group, the Digambara, that even clothes are discarded, and male followers practice their austerities in the nude. Jaina doctrine and epistemology were highly developed. The Jainas compiled a canon that has survived until today. Their oldest scriptures are written in the Ardhamāgadhī language.

The period around the fifth century B.C.E. in central India was a time of ferment in the history of Indian thought, as the above list of heterodox teachers indicates. As we have seen, one of the most important questions discussed by religious thinkers at this time was whether or not moral actions affected the person who had performed them (in other words, the existence and functioning of karmic cause and effect). If moral actions did have effects, then the religious practitioner had to investigate how he might break his karmic bonds and free his mind or soul. This question was closely related to teachings concerning rebirth. Although doctrines concerning rebirth are not found in the *Vedas*, by the time of the *Upaniṣads* teachings on rebirth had begun to appear. The term "*saṃsāra*" for rebirth does not appear in the oldest *Upaniṣads*, but it is used frequently in *Upaniṣads* composed after the time of the Buddha. It thus appears that the concept of repeated cycles of birth and death was being given its classical formulation at the same time that Buddhism was being established. Once the concept of rebirth was established, people naturally began to speculate about whether some entity or soul might travel through the cycles of birth and death.

People were discussing karma before the time of the Buddha, of course. The idea of karmic fruits, however, was not generally recognized at that time. These vague ideas of karma were incorporated into Buddhism and systematically interpreted in a uniquely Buddhist manner as a law of cause and effect. The Jainas too recognized karmic causes and effects, but for them the results of actions were usually characterized as "punishments" (*daṇḍa*).

A large number of theories were advanced concerning the Self or entity (*ātman*, *jīva*; P. *attan*), which transmigrated through births and deaths, and the realm (*loka*) in which the Self existed. In the Pāli *Brahmajālasutta*, no less than sixty-two different positions on these sub-

jects are described. A particularly important issue concerned the manner in which a constantly changing mind could grasp or perceive the unchanging *ātman* thought to exist behind it. According to Jaina sources, there were 363 different contending schools that could be classified into four basic groups: those who recognized karma, those who did not recognize karma, the skeptics, and the moralists.

In Buddhist texts, the non-Buddhist schools of thought are divided into three main groups: those who believe that everything occurs through the will of god (P. *issaranimmāna-vāda*), those who maintain that every event is predetermined by past karma (P. *pubbekatahetu*), and those who believe that everything occurs by chance (P. *ahetu, apaccaya*). The Buddha rejected all three of these alternatives because they denied free will and the efficacy of human efforts; instead, he preached a moral law of cause and effect that transcended these three positions.

Non-Buddhist positions were categorized in other ways. One of the most important is a classification into two philosophical positions. The first, the *pariṇāma-vāda* position, was maintained by the orthodox Brahmanical thinkers, who argued that both the Self and the world evolved and developed from the unitary Brahman. The second was maintained by thinkers such as Kakuda Kātyāyana, who did not recognize a single Absolute, but instead argued that people and the world were composed of collections of eternal elements. Their position is called *ārambha-vāda*. Both of these positions were being formulated at the time of the Buddha.

Religious practices at this time were also classified into two major groups: meditation and ascetic practices. Those who advocated meditation tried to realize deliverance through contemplation and quieting the mind. The ascetics tried to attain salvation by using ascetic practices to cut off the delusions that controlled the mind.

In conclusion, by the time of the Buddha, Vedic religion had already lost most of its power to attract people, but no new religious authority had replaced it. In this age of religious ferment, many thinkers appeared, each seeking the Absolute within himself.